WHAT makes for a good death? Is the answer different if you live in Scotland or Africa? Is there such a thing as a good death?

"I want to go to sleep and wake up dead," said Catherine, one of my Kenyan patients at Chogoria Hospital.

"There are times when the pain is so severe that I feel like hanging myself," Gatonga told me. Living at this rural hospital from 1997 to 2001

we watched diseases such as AIDS and cancers destroy life. Services and treatments were largely absent, so a priority was to establish a palliative care programme. To do this we listened to what patients and their careers needed.

In Edinburgh at the same time, another study asking similar questions was under way.

What value is there in comparing the experiences of dying in two very different countries? One where specialist palliative care is available free, the other where cancer was not a national priority, where there were no specialists, or easy access to chemotherapy, or good pain relief.

Something extraordinary began to emerge from the stories of the African patients. Their pain was often severe, and for their families, the task of cleaning sick and immobile patients when there was no running water was extremely difficult. Yet there was peacefulness and acceptance about life and death. Many of the patients we interviewed in Edinburgh talked of their fear of death, their fear of the unknown.

Professionals were largely missing in the care experience of those in rural Kenya, but community was not. People were around the patient, bringing food, singing and praying. Company made dying bearable.

Palliative care has a long way to go in Africa and Edinburgh University is working there to improve services. But we in Scotland can learn much from Africa about caring for those nearing the end of life. Physical care is critical, but so too is the care of patients' spiritual and social needs. Good palliative care can be delivered best in the community, we need to rebuild our communities and talk about death as a path we all must tread.

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